



Yatra: Journey of the Soul



Adi Sankara Nlayam



Meditation on a boat.

Swami Ishwarananda has led several yatras for CM members from across the U.S. and India. From the arduous Kailash yatra in the far reaches of the Himalayas to the southern tip of India, Kanyakumari, he has abetted divine darshans as well as meetings with various sages. Traveling with him to the holy sites as also meant listening to short yet profound talks on temples and gurus, laced with an intrinsic vedantic understanding. In November this year, he will lead yatris to South East Asia to encounter the glorious past of Hinduism in Cambodia, its practice in Bali and observe its abiding underlying influence in the region on the art, thought and customs of today. Here he talks with his usual clarity about the meaning of a yatra, with lightness about good times with yatris and with great love and quietness about what the Kailash yatra meant to him:

Q: Why is a yatra important for a Hindu?

Swamiji: The root word for yatra is ‘ya’, meaning ‘go.’ Yatra means a journey and in the context of spirituality it is a journey of the soul. It is not about physical travel but about the soul seeking fulfillment. We often forget this because we have so many external obstacles that come in the way: the activities we engage in, the food we eat, the books we read, the friends we keep. In a yatra all becomes holy and pure. We are with people who also seek the lord; we eat the right food, chant mantras and meet holy people. We believe that we accrue punya points when we undertake this journey. What does this mean? It is said that it gets you closer to reaching heaven, but punya essentially means that in this jivan yatra, the soul has moved forward.

A yatra is different from going to a tourist spot. It is undertaken with a clean attitude of devotion and respect by people who have faith rather than money alone. Water by itself is not holy. The Ganges is made holy by the people who visit it. The water in the container at home becomes holy teertha after a puja, otherwise it’s just water.

Yatras are also undertaken to remember our forefathers. Without this journey to Benares or similar places we just would not think of our own lineage. Third, a yatra brings us in contact with tradition and culture. There is a big difference in travelling to say Delhi and Rishikesh. In holy and ancient places we can immerse ourselves in the religion and culture, which creates greater awareness in each of us. Finally, it also reinforces faith. If you believe in what mythology has told us, then being in these divine places, brings us closer to it. All of this goes toward elevating the soul.

Q: Places of nature like the holy Manasarovar can strike awe in us and it’s easy to worship here and in similar places. What makes a man-made place, like say Chidambaram, pilgrimage worthy?

Swamiji: It’s not just about how ancient a temple is. In a divine place, many mahatmas have visited. They have prayed, done tapas. There is an energy they have brought there, it has unique vibrations.

Q: Why does a temple or holy site lose its importance to the devotee?

Swamiji: Because of discontinuity of traditions and worship. Or it is used for wrong purposes.

Q: In excitement and anticipation we undertake long journeys to visit a holy temple. When getting our darshan we experience quiet. Can’t we just get receive the blessing of that silence at a local temple or at home?

Swamiji: But we don’t have that much maturity! Don’t we feel that if we go to the gym it will be better than working out at home? Everyone is exercising, so you can’t be the only one sitting there! Pilgrimage sites have an atmosphere and vibrations. Going to the Samadhi of a holy person is different from having a picture of the Samadhi at home. It feels different, the experience is different.

Q: Who is qualified to be a yatri?

Swamiji: One who has faith. It’s a simple but powerful qualification. It’s not the body that is undertaking the journey. You are not going there merely to visit a place. When there is faith and holiness attached, it is Kshetra-atanam, a pilgrimage.

Q: For the upcoming yatra, how are you preparing the yatris?

Swamiji: We will be working on connections between Hinduism and Buddhism. I want them to understand that Buddhism is not opposed to our thinking, it’s an offshoot. We will learn where the faiths meet and where they diverge.

Q: What are the biggest challenges before and during a yatra?

Swamiji: To give yatris the right perspective so that they can leave behind their daily challenges not just physically but oth-

erwise too. During the yatra, it is to make sure that the sense of purpose is not lost and the itinerary does not over engage in activities that are not related to the primary mission. At the practical level, we have tight schedules so we have to make sure that they are met. Then there are the finances, the conveniences, etc.

Q: From the multiple yatras you have been on, which holy pilgrim site is your favorite and why?

Swamiji: Kailash. It really is a pilgrimage. We had to prepare for it by training our body physically, physiologically with our breathing, etc., mentally and emotionally. We were focused. Once the yatra began, for 15 days we concentrated only on our goal. For those 15 days the mind was fixed and anxious to see the lord. There was nothing to distract us. The first sighting of Mt.Kailash amongst the clouds is unforgettable. For five days as we did our puja and everything else, we had Kailash in our vision. It was a powerful experience, we didn’t want to leave.

Q: In your mind do all the conveniences that we want during a yatra - the plane rides and quality hotels – distract or offer physical comfort so we can focus on the main purpose?

Swamiji: Adi Sankara traveled the length and breadth of India on foot and then gave up his body at an early age. That was then. Gurudev used to say that he himself didn’t need to walk and in a short time could reach more people by using other modes of transportation. Technology and convenience by itself cannot become an impediment or distraction to faith. Today, earning a living is important and because of this people lack time. Yet, they have faith and that has to be appreciated.

Q: What effect have you observed over CMLA members who have been on yatras?

Swamiji: At the external level, they become a family, there is a closeness. But it is the belief in temples and our agamas that get affected more. They also seem to become more aware of the past through the architecture of temples and learn to appreciate the culture even more. One yatri told me recently that after going on the Dakshin Yatra in 2008 and visiting Chidambaram, she had been receiving prasad each month for the entire year that she had made a donation toward. But the amazing thing is, the young priest there continued to send it to her for almost a year and half more. He must have spent more on postage to the U.S. than the donation which he received. Think of the sincerity! It’s our culture at its best.

Q: In dealing with yatris over the years, do you have a laugh out moment about us?

Swamiji (smiling): Not laugh-out maybe, but definitely memorable was when I made yatris take a dip in Manasarovar. I began by coaxing them to do it once, but once they got in, I made them do it seven times! In the name of Lord Shiva of course, Mata, Lord Subramanaya and Gurudev! It was Aug.3, 2004, Gurudev’s Mahasamadhi day. Many of them emerged from the water shouting out loud about the cold!

Q: Any other message Swamiji?

Swamiji: Yes. I really would like to see youth visit temples. Culture is a set of beliefs. We come together when you and I believe in the same things, the same values. If you read the article in the National Geographic (June 2011, ‘The birth of a religion’) you are given to understand that religion created cultures and not the other way around. You are given to understand that man first turned to worship and religion, built around it and because of it settled down. It posits that hunter-gatherers did not settle down and then create their gods. Youth should understand their religion and with it their culture. – NIMMI RAGHUNATHAN

Guru Poornima Marked With Prayer and Gratitude



Guru Poornima was celebrated at Rameshwaram on July 17. Swami Ishwarananda and Acharya Mahadevi performed the paduka puja. Devotees of Gurudev were present and participated in the chanting. Guruji Swami Tejomayananda’s message on guru and gurudev was played and listened to with reverence by all. CMLA board members offered *bhiksha* and *prasad* to all on the occasion.

CHYK Lend a Hand in Community Garden



A group of CMLA Chyk on July 30 volunteered their time at the Stanford Avalon Community Garden in Watts. The group spent time helping out in Eric Garcia’s lot where he has been growing Spanish herbs and vegetables. Chyk members helped weed and irrigate the plot. Working there brought home the concept and usefulness of community gardening to them: city owned land in difficult locations is made arable by residents, not only keeping an area green, but also reducing home grocery budgets. Sameer Murali who got the seva project going said, the group was pleased to be lending a hand in making available fresh produce and contributing toward a healthier lifestyle.

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